How can organizations reap the benefits of a diverse workforce?

Assessing the organization’s diversity paradigm

Too often, organizations focus on merely recruiting employees from different demographic groups, mistakenly hoping the benefits of diversity will magically follow. Whether or not an organization will fully benefit from diversity, however, depends on how its members answer the questions, “What do we do with this diversity? Why do we want a diversified workforce?”

Organizations must explicitly address these questions if they are to prevent diversity efforts from backfiring and if they are to reap the oft-touted benefits of better performance and productivity. Engaging in conversations about these questions is essential, then, even if such conversations initially seem time-consuming, abstract, or even ominous.

Ely and Thomas identify three different paradigms — each with different assumptions and outcomes — that can help members of organizations understand how they think about diversity (See chart on flipside):

> the Discrimination – Fairness Paradigm
> the Access – Legitimacy Paradigm
> the Learning – Integration Paradigm

The first two paradigms — the most common, to date — result in some positive outcomes but limit the benefits an organization can gain from diversity. Only the Learning-Integration Paradigm allows organizations to recognize the full potential of a diversified workforce.

What companies can do

1. Initiate explicit conversations about the organization’s diversity paradigm.
   For resources to begin such conversations see the resources listed below and the diversity paradigm chart (see flipside).

2. Consider several preconditions necessary for shifting to a learning-integration paradigm.
   Assess to what extent these already exist and select the most feasible areas for improvement. (See additional resources listed below.)
   > The organization understands that a diverse workforce brings different approaches to work and that these are to be learned from not “fixed” to fit the existing norm.
   > The organizational culture stimulates personal development.
   > The organizational culture encourages openness.
   > The organization has a well-articulated and widely understood mission.
   > The organization has a relatively egalitarian, nonbureaucratic structure.

3. Take a small steps approach.
   Not all preconditions need to be in place at once for change to occur. The learning and integration paradigm can be approached from several angles at once and is best accomplished initially in small groups.

Resources


For practical tools and workshops: Cornell’s Diversity and Inclusion Practice Program [http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/ctap/]; MDB Group, Inc. [http://www.mdbgroup.com/]

ncwit.org  Catherine Ashcraft, author
National Center for Women & Information Technology
# Organizational Diversity Paradigms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradigm</th>
<th>Assumptions &amp; Practices</th>
<th>Pros</th>
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| Discrimination – Fairness (Assimilation model: “we’re on the same team despite our differences”) | Underlying assumption: Diversity is important because discrimination is unfair  
Discrimination is defined primarily as formal or legal barriers  
Equality is defined as “same treatment for all”; goal is “gender- or “color-blindness”  
Remedies remove formal barriers for individuals by recruiting, retaining, prohibiting formal discrimination, etc.  
Mentoring programs focus on helping diverse employees “fit in” with established company norms  
Progress is measured primarily in terms of recruitment and retention goals | Often effective at increasing “the numbers”  
Promotes “fair” treatment of all, at least in terms of formal procedures | Gender/colorblind ideal is implausible and often invalidates diverse perspectives  
Makes it difficult to see less formal instances that result from subtle institutionalized racism/sexism  
“Diverse” employees often feel silenced  
Ignores ways that gender, race, and cultural differences might alter or shape mainstream work practices |
| Access – Legitimacy (Differentiation model: “we’re on different teams doing what our differences help us do best”) | Underlying assumption: Diversity makes good business sense in a multicultural society  
Equality is not defined as “sameness” – does not strive for gender/colorblindness – instead, “celebrates” difference  
Diverse talent is used to expand market share and connect to broader clientele  
Employees are trained to accept difference through mentoring, diversity training (but not necessarily learn from or change because of it)  
Progress is measured primarily in terms of bottom line | Easier to get leader and employee “buy-in” because of connection to business outcomes  
Often succeeds in improving business outcomes/relations with diverse clientele/consumers | “Celebration of difference” pigeonholes people into jobs that fit their “niche” or “cultural background”  
“Diverse” employees often feel exploited  
Ignores ways that cultural differences might alter or shape the mainstream work of the organization |
| Learning – Integration (Integration model: “we’re on the same team with, not despite, our differences”) | Underlying assumption: Diversity enhances all aspects of an organization’s work and goals  
Equality is not about gender/colorblindness or about simply “celebrating” diversity  
Organization engages diversity and expects to learn from the conflicts it creates  
Diverse perspectives are harnessed for rethinking previously taken-for-granted business practices, missions, products, markets, and culture  
Diversity programs aim to help employees view diversity as learning experience, to help them learn from conflict rather than fear or suppress it  
Progress is measured in multiple ways (e.g., demographics, business outcomes, and evidence of organizational change) | Often effective at increasing the numbers  
Often effective at improving business outcomes  
Often effective at innovating work processes for productivity | Engaging diversity and learning from conflict can make people uncomfortable  
Difficult to achieve, particularly if organizational structure is very bureaucratic and hierarchical  
Easier to achieve in smaller businesses or smaller work units |